

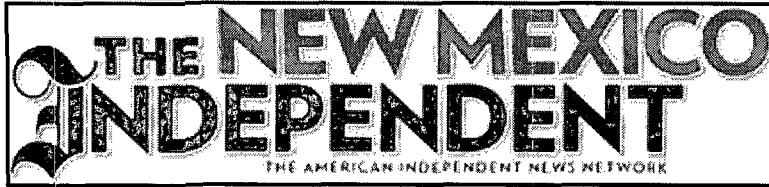
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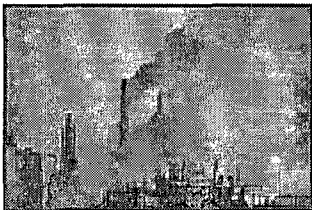
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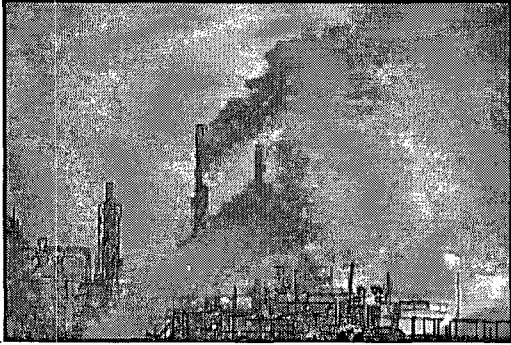
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Artesia refinery cited for safety violations before deadly explosion

By [Bryant Furlow](#) 7/14/10 10:28 AM

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Navajo refinery. Photo by Glemibly

[Artesia](#) Fire Chief J.D. Hummingbird heard the explosion at the [Navajo Refinery](#) just before 1 p.m. March 2. He stepped outside to see a large, black plume of smoke rising from the facility, which sits at the intersection of two busy highways less than a mile from the fire station.

Firefighters arrived to find a storage tank, where contractors had been welding, engulfed in flames.

Two of the workers, Natividad Andajo and Victor Villa, were dead. Their bodies were burned beyond recognition.

Two other workers, both critically-injured, were airlifted to a hospital in Lubbock, Texas. One of them, Juan Carlos Hermosillo, 24, suffered broken arms, broken hips and fractured vertebrae.

The refinery's Dallas, Texas-based parent company, [Holly Corporation](#), immediately issued a press release confirming at least one fatality.

The New Mexico [Occupational Health and Safety Bureau](#) is investigating the explosion, Bureau chief Butch Tongate told [The Independent](#) earlier this week.

The exact cause of the explosion is not yet clear, but the investigation comes at a time of [increasing concern](#) about safety problems at refineries nationwide. Hermosillo, who filed a lawsuit from his hospital bed in March, claims in court records that safety inspections were not conducted before welding began the day of the explosion.

"The fire was tragic and the cause is still under investigation," refinery attorney Joel Carson told [The Independent](#) in an e-mail.

Four lawsuits have been filed against the refinery, Carson said: two by the dead workers' families and two by the injured workers. The company conducted internal safety reviews but cannot comment on those because of those pending lawsuits, Carson wrote.

Ten 'serious' safety violations in three years

Bureau inspection records obtained by The Independent show a series of serious safety lapses at the Navajo Refinery between 2007 and 2009. A total of three Bureau inspections — a comprehensive, four-day-long inspection in December 2007 and two single-day inspections in November 2008 and October 2009 — identified a total of 11 occupational safety violations at the Navajo Refinery, Bureau records show.

All but one of the violations were deemed "serious," meaning they represented a hazard or condition with a "substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result," Bureau records show.

None of the violations involved storage tanks and the company remedied the identified problems within months of being cited, Bureau records confirm.

Nine of the 11 violations were identified during the comprehensive 2007 inspection. That inspection was part of a nationwide effort coordinated by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Navajo Refining Company President David Lamp told The Independent in an e-mail.

"We always conduct our business with high regard for the health and safety of our employees, contractors, and neighboring communities," Lamp wrote. "The items identified in this investigation carried penalties of approximately \$1,000 to \$2,000 for each item, plus a requirement to take corrective action for each noted deficiency. Navajo paid total fines of approximately \$15,000, corrected the majority of the items in the month the report was issued, with all items corrected within three months of the report."

The facility is actually composed of two separate plants: one in Artesia and another 65 miles to the east, in Lovington. The two plants are considered a single refinery because they transfer petroleum products by pipeline and both plants contribute to the same refinery process, Tongate said.

The 2007 inspection identified nine violations, eight of them serious, ranging from damaged fireproof coating on facility support beams and missing guard rails, to missing danger signs, missing electrical safety equipment and improperly maintained respiration equipment.

Padlocks that ensure electrical equipment is turned off before repairs are attempted, were not properly installed, inspectors found in 2007. Two years later, during the November 2009 inspection, inspectors discovered lax lockout procedures, including the substitution of padlocks with plastic zip ties.

"That's a situation where there's a piece of machinery where they are required to de-energize ... in case somebody accidentally turns it on while somebody's inside," Tongate explained.

Other serious safety violations at both plants involved inadequate fireproofing. Fireproofing was cracked at damaged on a column in the Artesia plant, inspectors found in 2007.

Fireproofing was an even more serious issue at the Lovington plant.

"Fire proofing on several columns throughout the (Lovington) plant was damaged," a June 2, 2008 Bureau violation letter states.

The safety violations identified in the 2007 inspection were corrected in summer 2008, within months of the company's receipt of Bureau citation letters, Lamp wrote in an e-mail.

"Safety is our number one priority and we take all safety matters seriously," Lamp wrote.

But in 2009, state inspectors found that employees had been exposed to hydrogen sulfide fumes at concentrations exceeding the federal occupational safety regulation limit of 50 parts per million. One worker was exposed to 662 parts per million — more than 13 times higher than federal safety regulations permit — without adequate personal protection equipment, inspectors found.


Even brief exposures involving inhalation of hydrogen sulfide at concentrations above 500 parts per million can kill and cause permanent brain damage, according to the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR).


The Navajo Refinery, in New Mexico's southeastern plains, is the larger of state's two active petroleum refineries. It processes between 80,000 and 100,000 barrels per day of crude oil, producing gasoline, diesel, jet fuel and butane, according to the Holly website, company earnings reports and the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Another explosion at the Artesia plant, caused by a butane gas leak, injured 17 workers nearly 30 years ago, in May 1981.

Holly Corporation owns two other refineries, in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Woods Cross, Utah.

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